DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 068 615 UD 013 003

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TITLE	Racial Differences in Newspaper Readership.
INSTITUTION	Educational Testing Service, Princeton, N.J.
REPORT NO	ETS-RB-72-37
PUB DATE	Aug 72
NOTE	14p.
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	Books; *Caucasians; Letters (Correspondence); Low Income Groups; *National Surveys; *Negroes; Newspapers; Periodicals; Racial Differences; *Reading Habits; *Reading Interests; Reading Materials; Reading Research; Recreational Reading

ABSTRACT

Data for this study were gathered as part of a national survey of reading activities of adults. The study was conducted by the Response Analysis Corporation of Princeton, N.J. A national probability sample of 5,067 adults, age 16 or older, were interviewed in their homes and asked about all the printed matter they had read or looked at the previous day--this sample representing 69 percent of the total number of adults who were interviewed. Four subsamples were also examined: blacks, whites, low-income blacks, and low-income whites. A comparison of the reading habits of blacks and whites in the general population indicates that the proportion of white readers is greater than that of black readers in every type of reading material. There is a larger racial difference in newspaper reading than in any other form of reading; this difference exists between all blacks and whites as well as between blacks and whites who are poor. The results of the study indicate that newspapers are not reaching a very large proportion of blacks, especially poor blacks. Even among those blacks who do read newspapers, certain sections such as editorials, women's and society pages, and regular advertisements are read considerably less frequently than by whites. It is speculated that newspapers do not respond to blacks' needs and concerns to the extent that is done by other printed media such as books and magazines. (Author)

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RB-72-37

ED 068615

RESEARCH BULLETIN

RACIAL DIFFERENCES IN NEWSPAPER READERSHIP

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UD 013003

Educational Testing Service
Princeton, New Jersey
August 1972

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Abstract

A national survey of the reading behavior of Blacks and Whites indicates that there is a larger racial difference in newspaper reading than in any other form of reading. This difference exists between all Blacks and Whites as well as between Blacks and Whites who are poor. Proportionately less Blacks read newspapers and those Blacks who do read newspapers tend to omit reading certain sections such as editorials, women's and society pages, and regular ads. It is speculated that newspapers do not respond to Blacks' needs and concerns to the extent that is done by other printed media such as books or magazines.

RACIAL DIFFERENCES IN NEWSPAPER READERSHIP

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Recent investigations on mass communication with the urban poor, many of whom are Blacks, have focused on the relative acceptance of various types of mass media by the poor and on the relationship between media use and demographic and sociopsychological factors such as race and alienation. At least two general conclusions emanate from this research. The first is that mass media are successful in reaching a large proportion of the urban poor. The second is that there is little difference in media use by low-income Whites and Blacks.

The findings relating newspaper readership to low-income city residents are remarkably consistent. Block[1] found that nearly two-thirds of inner-city residents of St. Louis, Missouri read or at least look at a newspaper almost every day. Sargent and Stempel[2] also report that two-thirds of a group of relief recipients in Athens, Ohio read newspapers for 20 minutes or more per day in comparison to 75 per cent of the general population. Greenberg and Dervin[3] report that 65 per cent of low-income residents of Lansing, Michigan read a newspaper every day in comparison to 77 per cent of the general population. The picture that emerges from these surveys is that newspapers reach the urban poor only to a slightly lower degree than they reach the general population.

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[1] Block, C.E. "Communicating with the Urban Poor; An Exploratory Inquiry," Journalism Quarterly, 1970, 47, 3-11.

[2] Sargent, S.W. and Stempel, G.H. "Poverty, Alienation and Mass Media Use," Journalism Quarterly, 1968, 45, 325.

[3] Greenberg, B. and Dervin, B. "Mass Communication Among the Urban Poor," Public Opinion Quarterly, 1970, 34, 224-235.

Two of the foregoing studies also investigated racial differences in newspaper readership in low-income samples. Block found that Negroes did not essentially differ in their newspaper reading behavior from Whites, while Greenberg and Dervin report that there was a greater difference in newspaper usage between a low-income and a general population sample than between low-income Blacks and Whites. Thus, race does not appear to be as potent as income in explaining newspaper reading among the urban poor.

Although the foregoing surveys of newspaper readership are consistent in their findings, generalizations of their results are hazardous because the studies were limited to residents of three midwestern cities. A second limitation of previous surveys of readership is that they focused attention only on a few of the salient mass media such as newspapers, magazines, books, television, radio and phonographs. Ignored were the less easily classifiable printed media such as writings or labels on packaged goods, billboards, notices or signs on bulletin boards, written instructions, road signs, etc. In order to gain a better understanding of the newspaper reading behavior of certain subgroups of the population, it is necessary to examine all printed media that are being read by these subgroups, not just newspapers. Thus, the purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which newspapers, which are among the primary media of mass communication, reach the Black minority of the population.

Method

The data for this study were gathered as part of a national survey of reading activities of adults conducted by the Response Analysis Corporation of Princeton, New Jersey. A national probability sample of 5,067 adults, age 16 or older, were interviewed in their homes in the period of April to November

1971, and were asked about all the printed matter they had read or looked at on the previous day. This national sample represented 69 per cent of the total number of adults who were attempted to be interviewed. Four nonmutually exclusive subsamples were examined in this study: Blacks, Whites, low-income Blacks and low-income Whites. Several relevant descriptive statistics of these four groups are presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

At the start of each interview, the respondent who stated that he could read newspaper headlines in the English language (and was classified as a reader) was asked for a complete list of his activities on the previous day. By being aware of the general activities conducted by the respondent on the previous day (e.g. working, going shopping), the interviewer could probe for specific reading behaviors that had taken place within the general activities. All readers were asked whether they had read newspapers, magazines, books, or mail on the previous day. Respondents who indicated that on the previous day they had a meal, worked, worked around the house, were at school, traveled or commuted, went shopping, engaged in club or church activities, attended theater, game or event, or engaged in other recreational or free time activities were asked what they had read in the course of each of these general daily activities. Thus, a highly detailed and comprehensive description of all printed matter that is read or looked at during a day has been obtained.

Weighting of responses was conducted prior to analysis in order to compensate for certain sampling biases. This statistical adjustment of the data gave greater weight to persons in large households (because they had a smaller

probability of being selected as respondents), to persons in high nonresponse locations, and to males (because a slightly lower proportion of them were interviewed than would be expected from the census data).

Results

A comparison of the reading habits of Blacks and Whites in the general population indicates that the proportion of White readers is greater than the proportion of Black readers in every kind of reading material (Table 2). The percentage difference in reading between the two racial groups is greater in some categories than in others.[4] The frequency of reading at school, club, church

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Insert Table 2 about here
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activities, and theater is only slightly different for the two groups probably because a relatively small percentage of both races engage in these activities. On the other hand, the largest percentage difference is in the reading of newspapers, with 27 per cent more Whites than Blacks engaged in this type of reading on a typical day.

Since one of the major discrepancies between Blacks and Whites is economic, it was hypothesized that income rather than race would be a more potent variable in explaining general reading behavior. A comparison of Blacks and Whites in the same income range should presumably eliminate any effect which income may have on reading behavior.

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[4]Tests of statistical significance of the percentage differences were not conducted because the large sample sizes would have made small and meaningless differences statistically significant.

All low-income Blacks and Whites were selected from the total sample for the purpose of comparing general reading habits (Table 3). All individuals in these two subsamples had an annual family income below $5,000. Again, more

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Insert Table 3 about here

Whites than Blacks read in every category except while at the theater, game or event and at school. The percentage differences of the two low-income groups are somewhat smaller than the differences between the two racial groups in the total sample suggesting that income does, in fact, have some influence on reading. Nevertheless, the pattern of differences remains the same with the largest difference again in newspaper reading. These data indicate that race, independent of income, is a significant factor in reading behavior, especially newspaper reading.

More detailed analyses of newspaper readership show that newspapers reach Blacks to an even lesser degree than would be inferred from the simple Black-White percentage differences in newspaper reading shown in Tables 2 and 3. There are significant reading behavior differences between those Blacks and Whites who do read newspapers. Blacks read a median of 4.7 different parts of the newspaper while Whites read an average of 6.2 parts. A comparison of the percentage of newspaper readers in each racial group who read specific parts is indicated in Table 4. Each newspaper part, with the exception of sports and

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Insert Table 4 about here

TV or radio program listings, is read by proportionately more Whites than Blacks The largest percentage difference is in the reading of editorials followed by the reading of women's and society pages, then regular ads.

The effect of race apart from income was analyzed by comparing the readership of different newspaper parts by low-income (annual income less than $5,000) Blacks and Whites who read newspapers. This comparison is indicated in Table 5. Surprisingly, the racial differences which exist in the general population become

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Insert Table 5 about here
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magnified in the low-income samples. Again, this finding suggests that race is a potent factor in newspaper readership.

Discussion

The meaning and effect of the racial differences in newspaper readership are open to speculation. Newspapers may be read by fewer Blacks than Whites because of their lack of relevance to Blacks' needs and concerns. On the other hand, it must be noted that books, magazines, and other forms of printed matter are read by almost as many Blacks as Whites. Why? Possibly because some of these types of readings are not so general as to ignore interests of minorities. This interpretation is supported by the lower readership by Blacks of editorials and women's and society pages. Neither of these parts is likely to bring out issues or present information of concern to Blacks, especially poor Blacks. There is no ready explanation for low readership of regular ads by Blacks. This finding, however, suggests that Blacks place themselves at a disadvantage as consumers by depriving themselves of information concerning the selection of goods and services.

The results of this survey, showing that 49 per cent of all Blacks and 36 per cent of low-income Blacks read newspapers, are markedly different from those

of previous studies which found that two-thirds of low-income city residents read the daily newspaper. The differences in the results could be accounted for by the differences in the samples (this study was based on a national sample while in each of the previous studies persons residing in one city were surveyed) and in the way the questions about newspaper reading were asked.

The finding that there are large differences in the newspaper reading behavior of Blacks and Whites is inconsistent with one previous study[5] which showed no such racial difference. Again, sample and method differences between the two studies could account for the apparent inconsistency.

Summary and Conclusions

A national survey of the reading behavior of Blacks and Whites indicates that there is a larger racial difference in newspaper reading than in any other form of reading. This difference exists between all Blacks and Whites as well as between Blacks and Whites who are poor.

The results of this study indicate that newspapers are not reaching a very large number of Blacks, especially poor Blacks. Even among those Blacks who do read newspapers certain sections such as editorials, women's and society pages, and regular ads are read considerably less frequently than by Whites. It is speculated that newspapers do not respond to Blacks' needs and concerns to the extent that is done by other printed media such as books and magazines.

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[5]Block, op. cit.

Table 1

Comparison of Four Study Groups on Relevant Demographic Variables (in percentages)

	Whites (N=4465)	Blacks (N=470)	Low-Income[a] Whites (N=1055)	Low-Income[a] Blacks (N=249)
Age 30 and older	69%	68%	76%	71%
High school education or more	61	36	34	20
Annual family income of $10,000 or higher	49	11	0	0
Administrative or professional occupations	21	7	6	1

[a]Annual family income less than $5,000

Table 2

General Reading Habits of Blacks and Whites

Type of Reading	Percent White (N=4465)	Percent Black (N=470)	Difference
Newspapers	76	49	27
Magazines	40	29	11
Books	34	25	9
Mail	54	41	13
Meals	43	31	12
At work	34	26	8
Working around house	48	34	14
At school	5	4	1
Traveling or commuting	71	54	17
Shopping	34	25	9
Club, Church activities	11	8	3
Theater, game, event	5	1	4
Recreation, free time	55	43	12

Table 3

General Reading Habits of Low-Income Blacks and Whites

Type of Reading	Percent White (N=1055)	Percent Black (N=249)	Difference
Newspapers	61	36	25
Magazines	31	21	10
Books	27	25	2
Mail	46	34	12
Meals	33	28	5
At work	15	10	5
Working around house	43	35	8
At school	3	5	-2
Traveling or commuting	49	44	5
Shopping	27	24	3
Club, Church activities	8	7	1
Theater, game, event	2	2	0
Recreation, free time	46	41	5

Table 4

Reading of Different Newspaper Parts by Blacks and Whites Who Read Newspapers

Newspaper Part	Percent White (N=3342)	Percent Black (N=223)	Difference
Main news	91	87	4
Local news	75	71	4
Women's and society pages	51	32	19
Sports	48	56	-8
Editorials	53	29	24
Financial & business	31	18	13
Comics	50	40	10
Classified ads	41	33	8
Regular ads	49	31	18
TV or radio program listings	36	42	-6
Magazine section	17	12	5
Movie & book reviews	22	19	3
Obituaries	10	7	3

Table 5

Reading of Different Newspaper Parts by Low-Income Blacks and Whites Who Read Newspapers

Newspaper Part	Percent White (N=659)	Percent Black (N=90)	Difference
Main news	90	79	11
Local news	73	65	8
Women's & society pages	49	27	22
Sports	38	45	-7
Editorials	53	20	33
Financial & business	22	13	9
Comics	47	39	8
Classified ads	41	31	10
Regular ads	48	29	19
TV or radio program listings	41	47	-6
Magazine section	17	11	6
Movie & book reviews	16	14	2
Obituaries	16	10	6